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SUBJECT: COVERING THE SPRATLYS; SILENCE IS OFFICIALLY GOLDEN

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: While international media widely covered the visit of Taiwanese President Chen Shui-bian to one of the disputed Spratly Islands over the weekend, Vietnamese media were largely silent. The Vietnam News Agency, the Government wire service, carried a story in which the Foreign Ministry Spokesman strongly criticized Taiwanese claims that the islands were "an intrinsic part" of their territory. But major newspapers, Vietnam's National Television, and online news outlets failed to pick up the story. This limited coverage of a significant policy topic reflects the restrictions the government imposes on editors and journalists on issues it deems sensitive. At least one prominent editor has paid professionally for pressing those boundaries a month earlier with his reporting on public protests regarding China's claims to the Spratlys. End Summary.

ISLANDS OF DISPUTE:

¶2. (U) Over the weekend on Saturday, February 2, Taiwanese President Chen Shui-bian inaugurated a runway on one of the disputed Spratly Islands and insisted the archipelago belongs to Taiwan. Disregarding the claims of other countries, he declared the island he visited, Taiping Dao - known as Ba Binh Island to the Vietnamese - "an intrinsic part of our territory." The visit and comments drew sharp and immediate criticism from Foreign Ministry Spokesman Le Dung, who insisted the Taiwanese leader's visit was a violation of Vietnam's territorial sovereignty.

¶3. (U) Vietnam News Agency - Vietnam's national wire service - reported that Le Dung said of the visit, "Vietnam considers the action a serious escalation that violated Vietnam's territorial sovereignty in regard to Truong Sa archipelago and increased tension as well as complication in the region." He went on to say that, "Vietnam demands Taiwan put an immediate end to such violations in the region."

4. (SBU) For an issue of such political importance, which also elicits strong public response, Vietnamese media provided only limited coverage of both the Taiwanese visit and GVN response. Virtually none of the major newspapers or online outlets picked up the Vietnam News Agency story. According to Embassy contacts in the media, the Spratlys dispute is an extremely sensitive one for the GVN who prefers it stay out of the headlines. The GVN also wants to avoid what happened in early January when Chinese - Vietnamese confrontations in the archipelago led to large protests in front of the Chinese Embassy in Hanoi (Reftel). Media sources tell us that, while the government authorities tolerated and perhaps even initiated the initial protests, they changed their attitude after Vietnamese students quickly used cell phones and text-messaging to spread word of the gathering. Crowds around the Chinese Embassy grew far more quickly than officials had imagined possible and by the third day, GVN authorities stepped in to disband the protests.

YOU'RE (NOT) FIRED

15. (SBU) Again according to PAS contacts, at the same time, GVN officials cautioned editors and journalists not to cover the protests, or carry stories related to the Spratlys. In defiance of the Government's directive, Nguyen Anh Tuan, Editor in Chief of VietnamNet - the country's major online news service - ran a story on the protests, including background on the sovereignty dispute. Almost immediately the Ministry of Information and Communication notified Mr. Tuan that it was firing him and fining him the equivalent of \$2000.

16. (SBU) Our contact told us that readers flooded the online service, as well as other outlets, with messages of protest demanding Tuan's return. Shortly after a very senior Vietnamese official (there are conflicting versions of whether or not this was the Prime Minister) contacted Tuan, who was in the United States at the time, and told him that he could ignore the fine and return to Hanoi where he would be reinstated as Editor in Chief as long as he agreed to the presence of a co-editor assigned to VietnamNet from the Ministry. Tuan did return to Hanoi to resume his editorial duties, with his new Ministry minder in place. He did, however, insist on paying the fine.

17. (SBU) Comment: As the weekend and January Spratlys stories and the official reactions to them highlight, the GVN remains anxious about maintaining its ability to control discussion of sensitive issues whose history might open it to public criticism. They also illustrate that the GVN is still apprehensive about public protests - particularly ones that grow and spread as rapidly as those at the Chinese Embassy. The Government's concern is to maintain control. Challenging this penchant, however, the Vietnamese public is clearly developing a taste for individual expression, albeit slowly and cautiously. Even as the Government works to limit certain stories,

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there are those in the media who continue to seek the very edge of official boundaries.

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